

Prayer Journal Workshop



Cate Russell-Cole

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Second Edition

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Published by Cate Russell-Cole

Brisbane, Australia

ISBN 978-0-9873175-6-8

First edition 2005, Revised in 2008 and 2012. Second Edition 2015.

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This book has been produced in accordance with Australian spelling and grammatical rules.

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Introduction

One of my greatest passions is prayer, though it hasn't always been this way. I used to be hopeless at prayer. No matter what I did, I couldn't get motivated. One day, the guilt drove me to ask God to help me to pray. In response, He placed a passion on my heart for prayer that has been a constant companion ever since. I can't imagine life without that rewarding, intimate contact with Him.

Since then, I have written and taught courses in journal writing. It was a joy to be able to take some of that material, expand it, and place it in a practical Christian workshop. Prayer Journal Workshop has been designed to encourage you to start and maintain your own prayer journal: a way of praying on paper.

It involves more than just 'please' and 'thank you' messages, it's daily, freely communicating with God about all aspects of your life; building a deeper relationship with Him. You can pour your heart out, record the highs and lows of your Christian walk, and work difficult situations through with the Lord. Journalling has also been found to have a positive affect on your health. Getting it "all out of your system" reduces your stress level, and in clinical studies has sometimes reduced people's need for medication.

My prayer, is that a prayer journal will make your walk with the Lord, so much richer!

Cate Russell-Cole 2015



Section 1:

Journal Know-How: Getting Started

"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you!"
Isaiah 26:3

A prayer journal is just like any other kind of journal. You set aside some time every day to write about what is happening in your life. What makes it special, is it is written to the Lord, like one long prayer.

It isn't formal. It can also contain your thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. You can write it in the same way you would write a letter to a friend, or similarly, as a conversation you would have with someone you can trust and confide in. God is interested in every aspect of our life, big and small, silly or solemn. A prayer journal is a way to learn more about Him, and to track where you have grown and been blessed, as you read back through the pages.

You can tell God about your day: what worries you, even what you have to remember to do. You can praise Him, ask Him questions about what to do, or things you don't understand. You can place your prayer requests for people you know in need, down in writing. This can also help you to remember to pray for them again in coming days. Some people like to read devotions every day and write down what they learnt or how it affected them. A prayer journal is also a great place for this. Others like to take their prayer journal to church or Bible Study, and jot down the points they want to remember. What you do and don't want to include, is up to you. The main idea is to be open, honest, and to set aside that time as a part of your time with God.

If you have trouble getting up early to pray, or finding it hard to close your eyes and try to stay focus, maybe a prayer journal will help you. The act of writing will keep you centred on what you are doing, and as it is addressed to the Lord, you will remember Who you are talking to.



Tools

There are a wide range of prayer journals available through Amazon.com and Christian bookshops. If you find one that meets your needs, that's great. If not, there are many other ways to keep your journal, and they may be cheaper and easier to obtain for you.

Some of the commercial books contain a verse and then the page is blank for you to write on. Some have prompts for you to fill in, the topics including praise, requests, a short devotion to read. Some focus on mission needs, some on personal needs. Different formats will appeal to different people, so you can choose what suits you best.

If you would like a more unstructured type of journal, which is the format I have based this workshop on, you have an almost unlimited range of options, and you can structure your journal any way in which your needs are best met.

There are many beautiful notebooks in stationary stores which you may enjoy writing in. You may prefer an exercise book, or a loose leaf folder, with or without dividers for various subjects. Choose one that you will be comfortable writing in, and let it be a joy. If you can afford a beautiful book, buy it. Don't forget that in this book you are honouring the Lord. He will be equally happy with any choice you make, as you are choosing to spend time with Him. However, you are also allowed to make it special! It's also a good idea to have a pen you are comfortable writing with. The more appealing your book and pen, the more you are going to be motivated to continue writing.

Try to find a quiet time and place where you can write as often as you can, and a safe place where you can keep your journal without fear of it being read. Your journal may contain some very personal issues which you want to share with the Lord, but don't want anyone else reading. Don't feel guilty about wanting some privacy. You can share what you have written with whoever you please, or no one. Again, that is your decision.



Writing Exercise

Write about what you need to clear from your path to get closer to the Lord, and be more committed to prayer? Write down a list of things you can do in your prayer journal.



The Courage To Start Writing

People are often put off by writing in a journal as they feel pressured to write perfectly. There is a little voice in their head from school which demands that anything written has to include a proper format, and correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. A journal is not like producing a school report. Even if you have been taught that there is only one way to write, and nothing else is acceptable, try to ignore the voice nagging in the back of your mind. Let go of the rules, and the "shoulds," and tell the critic in your head to be quiet!

God asks us to make a joyful noise, He doesn't demand that we be professional, perfect singers to praise Him. Your prayer journal will be the same. It doesn't have to be a perfect book which is so professional, you could take it out and get it published. What will count is your honesty, and the fact that you are choosing to spend your time and your life with Him. You are writing for yours and His eyes only, so don't worry about the "correct writing rules."

- Write very quickly until your time is up.
- Never stop to reread what you have written.
- Don't make any corrections as you write.

- Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or anything except playing around with the question or topic at hand.



Remember That You Are Loved

I've been through some really hard times over the past few years with serious health issues, financial pressures, losing a job I truly loved and the various other rigours life puts us through. One day I felt so low, I went into our local Christian bookshop for comfort. I'd been in there before and felt the presence of God. I made a special trip there that day, as all I wanted was to be near my Dad!

God did something really special. As soon as I went through the door, I had a really strong feeling in my heart, that God's face lit up in a huge smile.

For many years God has placed burdens on my heart to uphold others in prayer. Countless times I have been woken in the night to pray for people, or I feel Him tugging at my sleeve during the day to ask me to pray. Quite often He wants me to pray immediately. When we have a need He responds THEN. We aren't scheduled or stuck on hold in some kind of queue. Whether we can see or feel it or not, His attention to how we are feeling and His overwhelming love for us means we get absolute immediate attention, one hundred percent of the time: totally without fail.

Learning that has changed my life. I have gone from being a Christian who sat in church depressed and hopeless, to someone who knows that if God will disturb my day or my sleep for someone else, He will do the same for me. We are all loved equally. I too am the sheep He would turn the planet upside down to look for when lost. I am the one He wants to pull under His protective wings and keep safe. I am loved so much, when I seek Him for any reason, He smiles, as He wants to be with me too.

So all of us being equally loved: yes we are! You also put a smile on God's face. Every time you think of Him, want to be with Him, or do anything which shows that you have a love in your heart for your Father, He smiles. You make Him happy. You too put a smile on God's face.



Success In Prayer

Prayer can be a really tough call, especially when things are going wrong, and your faith in God's goodness and provision are really taking a beating. M. Scott Peck wrote, "*Life is hard.*" As prayer also meets the challenges of life, it is hard too, and sometimes heart

breaking. In my worst moments, I seem to be split down the middle. Part of me believes God is for me, but part also believes He isn't. Part sees Him as a kind Father who protects, heals and comforts, but then it appears He doesn't always act like it. He is willing, but is He? I know He is good to me from past experience, and I know what the Bible says about God never ever turning His back on us. I also know that my vision is clouded and not seeing clear truth through my pain, but it is still so hard! Then I wonder why I do it. Why pray? Why believe in God at all? Does it really work? Is it all worth it?

Success, even though we unconsciously measure ourselves by the same standards. We think success is reaching the goal every time, getting exactly what we asked for, and sidestepping disaster and suffering. Our prayers have to be answered exactly how we perceived it, or we feel cheated and discouraged. We want to win, and we want everyone to know we won. We want to be recognised for our contribution. We want to feel safe, strong and like we cannot ever be violated or hurt. We want a 100% guarantee against disaster, in the same way we take out car or house insurance. Don't we feel so robbed and cheated if this doesn't happen? However have to let go, and let God do as He knows best. Jesus told us we would suffer. It is in our suffering that we grow to be people of faith, love and kindness. If we never suffered, we would be spoilt brats with no appreciation of pain, or the sanctity of life and love. How much more destructive to each other could we then become?

God has granted everyone a free will. Some will use theirs to hurt others, other will use theirs with kindness. Short of allowing God to control us like mindless puppets, we have to live with the consequences of other's bad choices. In a catastrophe of great magnitude such as a war, or acts of terrorism, there is great suffering. It is a cold, hard reality. We want the freedom to live our lives by our free will, as we please, and this is the price we pay for it.

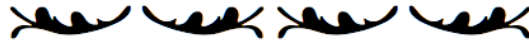
The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* I have heard this verse quoted many, many times, so often that I don't even stop to think about what this really means when I hear it. We take it for granted that God is 'on tap' twenty-four hours a day. How little we see of how much God is working in us individually through His Holy Spirit. How little we see of His daily efforts to build us up, make us stronger, carry us through, and guide our direction. I know I am blind, but this I also know, that there is a link between my Father and I, that no matter how lost I feel, remains. Through this He gives me strength, and through this He has made His mark in the innermost part of our beings which tells us that we cannot walk away from Him, we cannot reject the truth. Because of our connection with God in the depths of our spirits, we don't give up. We do keep praying. Thank God He loves us enough to be so intimately linked with us, and constantly working. Without His unseen efforts, I would have fallen away from Christ many years ago.

Keep going forwards, hold onto your vision, and keep praying with faith in the Father. He will never leave us with so little comfort and encouragement that we cannot go on, and as He said, He will never leave or forsake us. I know myself I need to be built up stronger in my faith. Jesus is the only one who knows how to build into me His strength. We all need to keep going, and keep looking forwards to better days ahead.



Writing Exercise

In your prayer journal, write down the Scriptures on prayer that give you the most encouragement, and refer to them when you need them.



A Thought Worth Pondering...

"We must no longer see prayer as preparation for action. Prayer must be understood as action itself, a way of responding, a potent spiritual weapon to be used in spiritual warfare against the most powerful forces in the world. Prayer is not undertaken instead of other actions, but as a foundation for all the rest of the actions we take." Jim Wallist



So Much To Do, So Little Time

Many people have a great problem managing time. These days it rarely seems a case of laziness, rather too much to be done, too many demands and too little time. "Techno stress" and "information fatigue syndrome" are becoming the prognosis for some of the tensions of the nineties. Top authorities on the "psychology of technology," Michelle Weil, and Larry Rosen, believe that, *"in the past decade we have seen technology invade our home, our cars, our movie theaters, our grocery stores, our jobs, literally every place in our lives. Every innovation - from cell phones to e-mail, from faxes to websites - demands new skills, speedier reaction times, creativity on call 24 hours a day. Technology keeps coming at us and we are told that we must adapt or fall behind."* This is an incredible amount of pressure to be carried by anyone.

I once heard someone preach a harrowing sermon on how God would make you account for every second wasted in your life, every moment you could have been doing something more productive. It scared me at the time, but later as my mind came back onto an even keel, I began to wonder if a giving God who gave us forests and oceans to play in would be that harsh? In the Psalms, King David talks of an instance with Israel in which God, being full of compassion, "...remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again." ¹ He did not execute judgement on His wayward people automatically, even though they were not perfect enough in comparison with Him.

Apart from the time we spend with our loving God and preaching the gospel, does every second have impending judgement hanging over it? Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 presents as a purpose for life, *"I know there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in*

their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour - it is the gift of God... (vs 17) ...for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work." God has designated that our time should be divided between work and play, there is a balance. We quite often unwisely take on more than we should, trying to balance our own expectations of ourselves with demands from others, then also stuffing in what we perceive God expects of us. In doing this, we overload easily, losing the ability to be still and wait in a world where activity runs overtime.

In Isaiah there is a clear message regarding striving and salvation. *"For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.' "*² *"Woe to those who go down to Egypt (the world) for help, and rely on horses (worldly strength), who trust in chariots because they are many (like technology has proliferated), and in horsemen because they are very strong (other people), but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!"*³

Science tells us that it is when we are at rest that our bodies grow. Our spirits work on the same principle. Back in chapter thirty, Isaiah tells us the answer to determining what we should and shouldn't be doing come from God, He will lead us in the path He has planned for our lives if we look to Him for help and seek Him. *"Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left."*⁴

There is comfort in the words, *"Have you not known? have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength."*⁵ Why not trust your calendar and expectations to the One who runs the universe? If anyone should know what they are doing and what is best for His creation, it is surely Him.

¹ Psalm 78:39 New King James Version

² Isaiah 30:15

³ Isaiah 31:1

⁴ Isaiah 30:21

⁵ Isaiah 40:28-29



Section 2:

Journal Know-How: Honesty With God

"Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you." James 4:8a

I don't usually watch day time television, but one day I went past the television set, and for no reason, just switched it on. Someone was interviewing a Rabbi, and they were talking about being honest with God, and how hard it was. There are so many parts of ourselves we feel ashamed of before a Holy God. We think the wrong things, want the wrong things, do the wrong things, say the wrong things...

I always liked the part of the Anglican church Service where they say "we have not loved You with our whole hearts... we have sinned against You in thought, word and deed... grant us, therefore gracious Lord, so to gather up the crumbs from under your table. For You are the same Lord who always has mercy." (I know I have probably quoted that wrong, but those are the parts I remember.) It summed up exactly where I was at: I had blown it in so many ways, that even the crumbs under God's table were more than I felt I deserved! Like Adam and Eve, when we do the wrong thing, our first instinct is to hide from God and pretend it never happened. If you are like me, you may also spend periods of time just not talking to God at all, because you feel rotten, confused and filthy, and just don't know what to say.

The Rabbi made a comment that has had an enormous affect my Christian walk, basically he said there is no point in hiding anything from God, because He knows it all anyway. You may as well just be honest from the start, and *that* is what God appreciates!

In Eugene Peterson's "The Message," he has worded Psalm 139 this way. (Last verses have been omitted. Please note, I have a habit of placing all words relating to God such as You and He references in capitals, as a mark of respect.)

*"God, investigate my life;
get all the facts first hand.
I'm an open book to You;
even from a distance, You know what I am thinking.
You know when I leave, and when I get back;
I'm never out of Your sight.
You know everything I am going to say
before I start the first sentence.
I look behind me and You're there,
then up ahead and You're there, too -
You're reassuring Presence, coming and going.
This is too much, too wonderful -
I can't take it all in.
Is there any place I can go to avoid Your Spirit?
to be out of Your sight?
If I climb to the sky, You're there!
If I flew on morning's wings
to the far western horizon,*

*You'd find me in a minute -
You're already there waiting!
Then I said to myself, "Oh, He even sees me in the dark!
At night I'm immersed in the light!"
It's a fact: darkness isn't darkness to You;
night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to You.
Oh yes, You shaped me first inside, then out;
You formed me in my mother's womb.
I thank You, High God - You're breathtaking!
Body and soul, I am marvellously made!
I worship in adoration - what a creation!
You know me inside and out,
You know every bone in my body;
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculptured from nothing into something.
Like an open book, You watched me grow from conception to birth;
all the stages of my life were spread out before You,
The days of my life all prepared
before I'd even lived one day..."*



Writing Exercise

Consider the areas of your life you hide, not only from God, but from other people.

Write about it in your journal and ask God what the wisest course of action is with opening up to others, and ask Him to help you be more open with Him.



His Love Endures Forever

God already knows where we are at, probably even better than we know ourselves, so we may as well be honest with Him!

The greatest blessing is that even though He knows every detail of where we are at, how we feel and what we are planning, His love never fails. He may be angered, but His mercy always reaches out to us, no matter what we do, as He loves us so much.

"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will take you back. In a moment of anger I turned my face away for a little while. But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer. "Just as I swore in the time of Noah that I would never again let a flood cover the earth and destroy its life, so now I swear that I will never again pour out my anger on you. For the mountains may depart and

the hills disappear, but even then I will remain loyal to you. My covenant of blessing will never be broken," says the Lord, who has mercy on you." Isaiah 54:7-10

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me. I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and bring you home again to your own land." Jeremiah 29:11-14

Not only can God handle our honesty, we are rewarded when we give it. Hebrews 4:14-16 says, *"That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to Him and never stop trusting Him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same temptations we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it."*

*"You will make your prayer to Him,
He will hear you,
And you will pay your vows.
You will also declare a thing,
And it will be established for you;
So light will shine on your ways." Job 22:27-28*



Writing Exercise

"When I am in bed, I pray or do not pray because..."
Write about what encourages you, or holds you back from prayer.



The Trap Of Our Feelings

Another reason why we often don't approach the Lord honestly is because we feel so unworthy. We think our thoughts, feelings and requests are not worth giving to Him, because we can never be who we feel we should be in God's eyes. The challenge we all face, is our ability to face the reality of where we're at, and what influences us as individuals, and be courageous enough to reach out for love, acceptance and healing. There is an identity we can make claim to which has more security, and a greater impact than any image we feel we need to live up to. It comes from the One who accepts us as daughters and sons, no matter how we feel about ourselves. He promises to give us double honour for our shame, and to heal our jaded, broken hearts.

We have a God who adores us so much, He refers to us as the apple of His eye. He is there to listen twenty-four hours a day to any fear, hurt or problem: and He does it without judgement. He is there to love us and give us His power and courage, whenever we find

we could use some help: and He does that with unconditional love and acceptance. He knows us more intimately than any lover, He is able to provide for all our needs, and He is the only One who has the wisdom to get us through tricky and painful situations. God will never leave us alone or leave our needs unmet if we take the time to ask Him and wait with open hearts for His assistance.

If you want to be loved, accepted, and you want to be 'Someone,' reach out and embrace Jesus Christ, the One who actually delivers on the promises He has made. *"Instead of your shame you will have double honour, and instead of confusion they shall rejoice in their portion."* Isaiah 61:7

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons (and daughters) by Jesus Christ Himself, according to the good pleasure of His Will, to the praise and glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved." Ephesians 1:3-6



Reasonable Limits: The Balance

One word of wisdom though. Even though I am encouraging you to be totally honest with God, that does not include writing a prayer journal full of complaints about people, putting others down, pride and bragging, or using God as a punching bag or scape goat for all our troubles.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon warns us, *"Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few."* Ecclesiastes 5:2 We are still expected to be mindful of the fruit of the Spirit in the way we relate to others, whether face to face, or in writing.

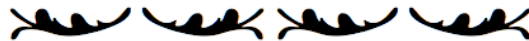
"You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is helpful. You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is beneficial. Don't think only of your own good. Think of other Christians and what is best for them." 1 Corinthians 10:23-24

"But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives." Galatians 5:22-25



Writing Exercise

In your prayer journal, talk to God about why you find it hard to be honest with Him, and ask Him for help in expressing how you really feel. If you have no hesitation in discussing any aspects of your life with the Lord, tell Him how much it means to you, to be able to be so open and trusting with Him.



Encouragement: Stubbornness as an Asset

You never hear the word stubborn used in a positive context; however, without it, you are sunk. It is one of those character traits that gets constant bad press, but is essential to survival in any tough situation.

Thesaurus.com lists stubborn this way: “adamant, bullheaded, determined, firm, fixed, hardheaded, headstrong, inflexible, intractable, obstinate, opinionated, persevering, persistent, relentless, rigid, self-willed, single-minded, steadfast, tenacious, tough, unbending, unshakable, willful.”

Ouch! It's the same as saying that 'stubborn' is made up of two four-letter words, strung together to create an obscenity. However, look at the gems that are in there: determined, persistent, steadfast, persevering. Plus in the face of cynicism, worldliness, rejection, needing healing, making relationships work, money hassles and life's other trials, isn't it better to be firm, fixed, single-minded and tenacious about doing what is right? Those are qualities which will stop you from abandoning your faith and good character.

Being too rigid and bullheaded may not be a character asset in life, but it can be when used to empower your personal faith and/or determination in ministry. So if you have a stubborn streak, when the road to success gets rough, wear it proudly. It will get you where complacent, compliant and yielding can never take you.



Section 3:

Journal Know-How: Coping With Dark Times

"For there is hope for a tree, If it is cut down, that it will sprout again, And that its tender shoots will not cease." Job 14:7

You know you're having a bad day when you start relating to Job. When you start defending him, somewhat late as it may be, then you're really stuck between a rock and a hard place!

I completely understood Job's feelings when he said:

*"Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat!
I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know the words which He would answer me,
And understand what He would say to me.
Would He contend with me in His great power?
No! But He would take note of me.
There the upright could reason with Him,
And I would be delivered forever from my Judge."
Job 23:3-7*

That is me, arguing with God, and desperately wanting to understand what He is saying in the situation when I can't find the meaning. However, in reasoning with God, I have had mixed success...

M. Scott Peck summed it all up for me when he said, *"life is difficult."* How many times I have wished that people would just admit that, rather than telling you all these wonderful spiritual solutions, and exactly what you should be doing. Christianity is like marriage, it is for better or for worse, and at times, the worse is really, really bad. Making sense of it at those times, is all but completely impossible.

I know we have all sinned, but do you think Job deserved what he got? The death of one member of the family rocks our world for months. The death of all of his children, financial ruin, sickness and disaster from all sides, seems to be overdoing it somewhat. Why did God go that far? It seems an extreme measure to prove a point, to Satan of all people, and I won't even start to go into the views of those who died in the process.

Somehow Job still managed to say:

*"Naked I came from my mothers' womb and naked I shall return,
The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD."
Job 1:21*

I would love to be able to admit that I have never charged God with wrong, never put Him on trial, never told Him that He didn't care enough, never accused Him of using me as a pawn in a game out of my control, never told Him that He had made a mistake. Many times, I have. Many times I have screamed at God, and in those times, I have received the clearest answers.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved.)" Ephesians 2:4-5



Writing Exercise

What are your weakest and strongest areas in your body, mind and emotions? Write about them.



It seems to me that the stronger the pain, the greater the Grace God makes available. When I really go over the edge, I always feel guilty that Jesus had to die to cover my ignorant tantrum, but isn't that love? He has the understanding of acute pain, and how blinding it can be. When we are built with a sense of justice that comes from Him, it rallies against what we see as being wrong. Fortunately, we have a God who became human, so He could understand completely our experience and point of view.

I am often not justified in what I say to God. I have often told Him that I would understand and it is His perfect right to stick a bolt of lightning through me for being so bold. Yet, if the *"earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available - dynamic in it's working,"* (James 5:16 Amplified Bible) then perhaps my roar is a prayer for help, and a prayer of faith. To blame God takes a belief in God, and to view Him as being the one withholding the blessing or the answer, takes a firm belief that He is truly a sovereign God that is in the driver's seat, controlling your life. Now that is a faith which pleases God, and saves the skin of outspoken children like me.

Somehow, the faithfulness of God always comes through, and the greater the problem, the greater is God's comfort. I have often received immediate answers that put me firmly back in my place. Through these answers I have learnt lessons of how much God cares, despite what I think of Him at the time. He is working hard in my best interests. Sometimes God is silent, He steps back and lets me work it all out in the light of what He has taught me before. The test is whether I act in faith in the end, or remain an accuser. Am I able to say, *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."* Job 13:15



Through The Hard Times

Life is difficult, and the lessons hard. However, I have learnt that if you can do your best, allow yourself space to scream, cry and pray, at the end there is a lesson or a healing that is so liberating, all you can do is look back in awe of God, and be amazed at what He has done... and it is all done in love, every part of it. Keep writing, pouring your heart out and waiting for God. It took me a long time to learn that the answers come, I just had to wait. It seemed so many times that God didn't care, but when I found out how much He had, I felt so guilty for my impatience, and was so blessed!

As for why God allows us to suffer, believe it or not, it's so: *"...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power."*

Ephesians 1:17-19

Amen! (Though I reserve the right to be less enthusiastic next times things get rough! I'm not perfect.)



Writing Exercise

In your prayer journal, have an honest talk to God about the times when you least feel like praying. You may like to ask Him to give you encouragement or inspiration which will keep you going through those times.



Surviving Suffering

Here are some Scriptures that I have personally found very helpful when going through hopeless situations. Remember Romans eight! Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

1. PRAYER

Main Base: James 5:13 and 5:16b

1 Corinthians 2:20 1 John 5:14-15 1 Peter 3:12

2. PEACE OF GOD

Main Base: Philippians 4:6-7

3. HOPE

Main Base: Ephesians 1:17-19

Philippians 1:6 and 4:8 Romans 12:12 2 Timothy 1:7

4. LEAN ON GOD

Main Base: 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 and Philippians 4:6-7

2 Corinthians 1:4-5 Philippians 4:13 Ephesians 3:16-20

5. BATTLE THE ENEMY, NOT GOD

Main Base: Ephesians 6:10-18

James 4:7 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

6. SEEK GOD, PRAY FOR WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING

Main Base: Jeremiah 29:11-14 and James 1:5

Jeremiah 33:3 Hebrews 4:15,16 James 1:2-8

7. PERSIST, NEVER GIVE IN

1 Timothy 6:12 2 Timothy 2:15



Writing Exercise

What lesson(s) have you learned?

What have the events that you've been through taught you?

Think of them as a sort of fable. What would the moral be?

Describe the events in a way that makes the lesson that you've learned clear. Once you've described the lesson, write about why it is an important lesson, and how you think that it will affect you in the future.



Prayer Lists

I know everyone has different prayer lists. Some are gifted in praying for revival, others for healing, others for missions, others for lists of needs that come their way. Some of us only have the energy to pray for help to get through life, others are creative and incorporate dance, art, music and other wonderful styles of worship. As I said in week one, you can format your prayer journal in any way you desire. I have left the major decisions about what and who you want to pray for, to you and the Lord. His leading is always best, always fresh, and this workshop cannot provide it. There is no proper way to pray. Everyone has a different style and a different way of praying, and that is perfectly OK. There is no magic formula. You just need faith to believe and receive.

The best advice I have ever been given comes from Pastor Oral Roberts: be specific! Ask God directly for exactly what you want. You don't need to use flowery words, or fuss

around as if you are trying to sweeten Him up. Just ask straight out. It's like setting a goal. Unless you write it down and it is in clear terms, you will never know if that prayer has been answered. God makes the terms of salvation and His plan very clear and specific for us. We can do the same. If you don't quite know what to ask for, you can pray a Psalm you relate to, and you can ask God for direction and wisdom. The most potent prayer on the earth starts with "Your will be done, not mine Lord."



Writing Exercise

Who has blessed you the most, and hurt you the most?
How do you need to pray for them?



A Thought Worth Pondering...

"As soon as a city is saturated with prayer cells, and Christians begin to pray for the felt needs of the lost, God surprises them with almost immediate answers to prayer. In fact, prayer for the felt needs of that one-hundredth sheep is the spiritual equivalent of dialing 911." Ed Silvano



Coping With Grief

I can remember when my father died after a long illness. I was surprised at how my friends seemed to disappear, not knowing how to cope with it or what to say. The problem was, I didn't know how to cope with it either. Even knowing what laid ahead didn't prepared me for the shock of what would happen once that final phone call came. It was incomprehensible.

The loss of a loved one, whether through death, divorce or long term separation, is a nightmare that faces us all from time to time. For the people most dependent on that loved one, the finality and sense of abandonment is particularly traumatic. Death forces us to ask the question, "who am I now that this person is gone from my life?" The readjustment to a new identity and family structure is challenging and takes time.

Each loss is unique, and there is no solution or comfort which will be the antidote to every faced crisis. People have found that having information available on how to cope with the practical aspects to their changed circumstances can help as much as emotional support, and provides some focus for planning their future. This information can cover not only financial and legal aspects, but also coping strategies and family support information.

Children cope differently with loss than adults. The younger they are, the less they will be able to understand what has happened, and how to deal with their feelings. Their sense of security and can be significantly affected. Like adults, they need to be allowed to grieve in their own way, and be given adequate time and patience to do it in.

The National Mental Health Association in the United States has a list of useful suggestions for handling grief on its web site. <http://www.nmha.org> The most important is to recognize the different symptoms of grief, and allow yourself to go through the emotions rather than shutting your feelings out or denying them rather than make others feel uncomfortable. Other than that, strategies which can help include seeking out caring people who understand and will support you, rather than just putting on band-aids and murmuring meaningless platitudes. Don't neglect yourself either. You still need a good diet, some exercise and plenty of sleep. It can be hard to remember to get on with such comparatively trivial things during a hard time, but you don't want to end up feeling sick on top of it either. If you need help, go have a talk with your family doctor.

When you are grieving it is not a good time to make important long-term changes in your life such as moving, starting a new job (unless financially necessary) etc. Be patient with yourself. You need time to recover and decide what to do next with a clear head. Try and look towards the future and getting through each day without becoming stuck in the past, and if you feel trapped in misery or have been depressed for a long time, get yourself some professional help. Most depression is treatable, and just because you have experienced loss doesn't mean you have to be miserable for months at a time.

If you are supporting a friend or relative who is grieving, be there to listen and help in a practical way. Remember that trite observations and clichés won't help. Listening and giving long term unconditional love are the best gifts that you can give.

Some people find it helpful to adopt a ritual they can use to remember and honour their lost loved one. This may be keeping a place set for them at the table on family occasions, lighting a candle, or even talking to them occasionally. Don't dispose of their possessions too fast. What is at one stage a painful reminder can later be a great comfort. Don't be scared to remember your loved one. Plant a tree, make a donation to a charity in their name, allow them a place to still live on in your heart.



Finding Out Where You Fit In

When I was a new Christian, one of the popular songs we listened to was David Meece's "Count the Cost." The song talked about how you need to give your whole heart to the Lord and serve: the focus was intense.

Over the years I joined churches which intensified the focus even more. You had to be in ministry *all the time*. If you spoke to someone with a ministry of prayer, you had to be a prayer warrior. If you were around people with a music ministry, they thought you were lax if you didn't slip in and out of praise and worship all day. The Bible scholars were on you to study, study study!

It took me a few years to work out that those who had a passion for their gift, sometimes couldn't see past it: thus pressure was passed onto others to use the gift the same way. I understand. I get passionate about my gifts too and don't know how others can possibly function without them.

However, the trap for me was when the pressure to always be in ministry became guilt, when God had me taking time out. Sometimes I have had seasons away from God's work. I always felt condemned when that happened. I thought I was a fat, spiritually lazy, gospel bludger!

Then a fellow blogger put a quotation her blog and it spoke to me: "God doesn't want something from us, He simply wants us." That was not the way I had been bought up to think in church... but it did make sense from the Biblical perspective God was slowly teaching me. "Spiritual peer pressure" to perform had to be put into perspective. The Bible often refers to seasons. There is a time to rest; a time to work. I had to work with *His plan* at any given time.

So if you don't fit other's gifts, or have a formal ministry, don't fret about it. If God has a ministry vision for your future, one will come along in His own good time. We have strength and bread for this day and that's what we always need to work on: what He is teaching us *now* as we focus on simply just being with Him.



Extra Writing Prompts

These will help you explore your spiritual life in your journal. You can take your time working through them. As you do, other areas you need to pray about may also come to mind.

- Answer these questions:

My greatest joy in life is...

My greatest passion is...

I am truly committed to...

My greatest challenge is...

My time and energy is focused on...

My greatest opportunity is...

What prayer points do your answers bring forward?

- Describe the perfect day as a Christian. Where does your real life fall short of this, and what can you do about it?
- Who in your family, neighbourhood, work / school and church has needs which most touch your heart? Write a prayer for them. Who least touches your heart? What may they need prayer for? (Please consider these without judgement.)
- If you could have been anyone in the Bible, who would it be and what do you admire best about them?
- Which of the many things that Jesus did, do you most admire and why? What does that say about who you want to be?
- Spiritually I have the following gifts ... How can you use your gifts and talents to bless others?
- Reflect on several events that have stimulated your growth as a Christian. Describe an event in detail. This exercise is designed to help you see your strengths, power and commitment.
- What are you most afraid of or worried about? What is making you anxious? Describe the person, object, or event that bothers you. Talk about specifically what concerns you -- Why are you worried? What's the worst thing that could happen? What do you hope will occur? How do your fears or worries relate to the things that have happened so far? How can you pray about this? Can you find Scriptures that give you some answers and hope?
- Who has impressed, annoyed, or pleased you lately? Who else has had the strongest effect on you? Describe the interaction you've had, and why you feel the way that you do? How have the other person's actions influenced the way that you feel? How can you pray for them? What do they need?



About the Author

Cate Russell-Cole has been a Christian for over thirty years and is a qualified Creativity Coach and Social Worker. She has a love of the science fiction - fantasy genre and has been writing diaries, appalling poetry and short stories since she was a child. Cate lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and two cats and habitually writes everything in Australian English.

Over her career, she has researched, written and taught five creativity-orientated courses; worked as a freelance writer, graphic designer, desktop publisher and has authored ten non-fiction books. Privately, she is a Christian science fiction/ fantasy author who is working on The Chronicles of Mirchar Series, plus a non-fiction study guide on the life of King David.

Other Publications by Cate Russell-Cole

- Write Your Life Story E-Course
- Unleashing Your Creative Spirit
- Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Building Emotionally Realistic Characters (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Phoenix Rising: Conquering the Stresses of the Writer's Life
- Phoenix Thriving: Conquering Stress and Burnout in the Blogging Life
- Savvy Blogging for Time Starved Writers
- Avoiding Back Pain: A Simple Guide
- Maintaining Your Independence, A Course For Seniors
- Person To Person: A Layman's Course in Communication Skills
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Dragon Tree
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Memory Library
- The King David Study Guide

